

The Rivers Casino is playing a hot hand.

With demand high, the North Shore casino is proposing to add 19 more table games to its offerings, its first major expansion since the state authorized the form of gambling last year.

The increases, if approved by the state Gaming Control Board, would bring the casino's total complement of table games to 107, third

most in the state.

The casino also is seeking permission for another major change -- the construction of a 15,000-square-foot second-floor ballroom that would offer customers views of the Downtown skyline.

Corey Plummer, the Rivers' vice president of gaming, said the proposal to add table games is driven mainly by customer demand.

"Table games have been very well received, not only in Pittsburgh but in Pennsylvania," he said. "The demand is there to increase table games, not only in quantity but in the variety of table games out on the floor."

While the casino has struggled to meet expectations in terms of slots revenues since its opening in August 2009, it has been one of the state's better performers in table games, typically finishing third or fourth out of 10 venues each month.

"The demand for table games has been pretty strong at the Rivers Casino," Mr. Plummer said, with blackjack the most popular table game there.

Of the 19 games the casino plans to add, six would be blackjack-style tables with live dealers and cards but electronic chip handling. The tables could be used for blackjack or other games

such as three-card poker. The casino would add a rapid roulette table featuring a live dealer and wheel and individual betting terminals.

Rivers officials also would add more traditional blackjack tables and poker derivative games. They also would convert four tournament-only poker tables to live poker tables.

Mr. Plummer said the expansion would give the casino more flexibility to adjust its table game offerings to the desires of its customers.

According the Standard & Poor's rating agency, the introduction of table games in July has had a "spillover effect" on the level of slots play at the casino.

Despite the improvement, the agency still has concerns about the casino's ability to generate enough cash flow to support its operating needs and additional obligations, including a \$7.5 million annual contribution to help pay for the new Consol Energy Center, particularly given potential competition from Ohio in a couple of years.

Nonetheless, given demand and performance so far, expanding the table game offerings "makes sense," said Michael Listner, a Standard & Poor's associate director who follows the casino.

Mr. Plummer said the casino hopes to have the new games in place within 30 days of receiving gaming board approval. They would be added to the casino's main pit areas near Levels bar. He declined to say how much the casino would spend on the upgrade.

He said the decision to introduce tables with electronic chip handling predated the recent arrest of a Rivers poker dealer who was accused of pocketing chips totaling \$501 in value.

Meanwhile, as one of the conditions for the casino's slots license, Rivers officials are required to have a ballroom built by early August.

Detroit businessman Don Barden, the casino's original owner, pitched the ballroom in his original plan for the riverfront venue. But he later got permission from the gaming board to push back the construction after the project ran into money woes.

When a group headed by Chicago billionaire Neil Bluhm took over the casino, it was required to follow through on the plans.

Mr. Barden had proposed building the ballroom in a large hangar-like space in the middle of the casino's second floor. However, Rivers officials now plan to build it on the casino's east side near the Carnegie Science Center.

They plan to invest more than \$2 million in the project and have it finished by late summer.

Jack Horner, a casino spokesman, said the new location would "take better advantage of riverfront and skyline views, which will make the room particularly scenic and attractive to event planners."

In its petition, the casino said the location would generate "significantly more bookings" than the original site and help to boost gambling revenues. The space could allow the casino to compete with Heinz Field, PNC Park and Downtown hotels for larger bookings.

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